

“You’d have to fight me now to take them away. I have a lot of joy to spread around.

All kids need to have a place to go, a home.”

Letha Pernell, foster mother who adopted one of the children she cares for

# Adoption Day creates new families

BY KATHY JESSUP  
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

CENTREVILLE-- A Sturgis Hispanic family of four became seven Tuesday and an African-American single mother with a 13-year-old son added a 13-month-old toddler to her legal household.

Sixteen-month-old Da’sha Mallo wrapped her small arms tightly around her new daddy’s neck during the official ceremony Tuesday that made her his daughter. The tiny redhead was never far from his side, even when she gathered a colorful, stuffed toy to her chest, a gift from St. Joseph County Family Independence Agency workers who had helped make her adoption happen.

In a courtroom that often provides a stage for the miseries of family life, three families celebrated happy milestones that put what they have felt in their hearts into legal decrees.

The stories that brought five children into the lives of their adoptive parents are riddled with sadness and failure. But Tuesday, St. Joseph County Probate Judge Thomas Shumaker called the county’s Michigan Adoption Day ceremonies a celebration of “the pure, unselfish love that characterizes adoption.”

The five youngsters adopted here were among more than 200 children who legally became members of new families in Michigan Tuesday. In 34 courtrooms representing 35 Michigan counties, judges signed the final decrees that legally tied children to adoptive parents the way heart strings already had. In southwestern Michigan, Cass, Kalamazoo, Allegan and Calhoun, all had similar Michigan Adoption Day ceremonies.

All three of the adoptions finalized in Centreville were arranged through the St. Joseph

County Family Independence Agency, which has had an award-winning placement program in recent years. FIA adoption workers typically work with children whose parents’ rights have been terminated due to abuse or neglect, looking first to relatives and foster parents for a permanent placement.

According to the Michigan Family Independence Agency, 91 percent of the 2,833 adoptions finalized in 2002 by FIA and private adoption agencies placed the children with a relative or foster parent. More than half the children looking for adoptive parents were age 6 or older and 80 percent were adopted with at least one sibling.

But there are still 400 children now in foster care who have no relatives or foster parents willing to adopt them.

Through an interpreter, Sandra and Gustavo Santana, of Sturgis, explained they adopted Sandra’s sister’s three children when Shumaker said their own mother “became overwhelmed with life.”

“I’m pleased to see you’re willing to keep them together as a family,” Shumaker told the Santanas, who added the youngsters, ages 3, 4 and 6, to their biological children, age 3 and 6.

Jeff Mallo, of Constantine, adopted his fiancée’s niece Tuesday. When the couple marries, the toddler will share their surname in addition to the life she’s had with them almost since her birth.

Letha Pernell’s 13-year-old biological son, Dylan, is protective of his 13-month-old adoptive brother, Rodney. Letha Pernell had been Rodney’s foster mother since he was two weeks old and was removed from his biological mother’s custody. He became her adopted son Tuesday and Pernell expects to complete a second adoption soon for four-year-old Crishawna, another foster child



KATHY JESSUP / SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Da’sha Mallo, 16 months, waits in the arms of Jeff Mallo, whom a judge pronounced as her new father Tuesday.

she’s raised the last three years.

“I’m the one who looks after them, who stays up with them at night when they’re afraid or sick,” Pernell said. “You’d have to fight me now to take them away. I have a lot of joy to spread around. All kids need to have a place to go, a home.”

Lynelle Peterson, a local foster and adoptive parent who’s started an adoption support group, told the new parents no parenthood ever comes with “a guarantee that it’s going to be happily

ever after.”

“It isn’t all just the Cleavers,” said Peterson, who’s been a foster parent since 1980 and added five adopted children to her biological family. “But please don’t ever think the values and beliefs you instill in your children are lost. They will be passed on for generations to come.”

For more information about FIA adoption services or the St. Joseph County Adoptive/Foster Care Support Group, call 269-467-1212.